



Iraqis Squeezed Out By Kurdish Expansion, Muslim-Centric Constitution

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(AINA) -- The postponement of the deadline for a new Iraqi Constitution was received as a reprieve of sorts by Assyrian Christians. The two most important points of contention in the Constitution deliberations are also the two most critical for Assyrian Christians including the growing role of Islam and the ever expanding territory and autonomy in the Kurdish occupied region. Whereas for some communities the issues represent an opportunity for political and demographic muscle flexing, for Assyrian Christians (also known as Chaldeans and Syriacs) and to some extent other minorities, the debates have transformed to matters of survival in an increasingly hostile Iraq.

- On August 9th in the Dora district of Baghdad 22 year old Sargon Isho was caught in the crossfire of two militant groups near the Mar Zaya church.
- On August 9th in Kirkuk 29 year-old, Saad Fawzi Abdiljabar was stabbed to death by his kidnapers in front of his home as he was leaving to work as an engineer in the Northern Iraq Oil company.
- On August 8th in Mosul 20 year-old arts college student Anita Tiadoros Harjo, was kidnapped in the Zuhur district of Mosul where she and her family reside. She was on her way to a nearby internet café.
- On August 6th in Bartilla, north Iraq the body of 42 year-old No'el Petrus, a pharmacist and a Bartilla native, was found on August 7th in nearby Mosul. Noe'l was kidnapped along with his brother, Amar, from his pharmacy in the city of Mosul and was later murdered. His brother was released after a \$50K ransom was paid by the family.



Two weeks earlier, Assyrian Christian residents of the Dora neighborhood of Baghdad awoke to find a new fundamentalist letter posted on their doors warning of the consequences if the family did not convert to Islam. Responding to the [threats of violence](#), the families appealed to the police for help, but were ironically advised to seek help at the local mosque. As one Assyrian explained "in the streets as well as the constitution committee, Iraqis are abdicating to fundamentalists."

For Assyrian Christians, the prospects of an ever increasingly Islamized Iraq appear real. "This is not merely an exercise in semantics," argued an Assyrian activist. These deliberations impact our daily lives from being forced to wear the veil to being assaulted as an infidel while shopping for food. When the State endorses a greater role for Islam, it automatically diminishes the status of non-Muslim minorities such as Christians, Yezidis, and Mandeans."

In the north, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) has capitalized on the impasse in the Constitution committee to establish more and more "facts on the ground" in order to de facto expand the Kurdish occupied area. Although the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL, [English, Arabic](#)) only allowed the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to occupy the areas they held prior to the war, Kurdish demands have recently increased to include Assyrian villages in the Nineveh plain. The landgrab envisioned by the KDP includes the villages and towns of the Nineveh Plain-- the proposed Assyrian Administered Area.

Recently, the KDP established several checkpoints surrounding Assyrian towns in the Nineveh plain, which lies outside the Kurdish region specified by the TAL. Assyrian Christians were routinely interrogated and sometimes abused by KDP paramilitary personnel. When an elderly woman objected to the harassment and the greater than life sized portrait of KDP warlord Masoud Barzani propped up on the road leading to her village, she was detained and threatened. She was only released after her local village elders intervened and reassured the local KDP paramilitary commander that the woman was frail and elderly and posed no real threat to the KDP tribal chief.

Assyrian Christians have not been alone as KDP hegemony has targeted other minorities in the north including Turkoman, Shabak, and Yezidis. On August 16, 2005, KDP gunmen shot at Shabak demonstrators protesting KDP policies in the area (AINA, [8-16-2005](#))

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According to one Assyrian leader, For Assyrian Christians as well as other minorities, the issue has become existential." The possibility now really exists that Iraqi communities other than the Kurds, Sunnis, and Shiites may not survive the new Iraq.

The real challenge facing the future Iraqi Constitution, however, remains the upcoming referendum in October. If a majority of any three provinces vote against the Constitution, it will fail. Noted one Assyrian leader, "If there is too great an emphasis on Islam or if the Kurdish occupied region and its autonomy are expanded then Assyrians will feel compelled to vote against the new Constitution." Another added "we may only be 5-7 % of the population inside Iraq (with several hundred thousand more outside), but with over one million in Baghdad, Mosul, and Karkuk, we could easily swing the referendum." Moreover, "How can anyone expect us to willfully acquiesce to our formal subjugation as second class citizens or worse still, to surrender our legitimate national aspirations to an abusive KDP occupation?"

To most Assyrians, the only reasonable answer to ongoing Islamist attacks and ever expanding KDP abuse remains the security of an Assyrian Administered Area in the Nineveh Plain. Such an area would serve as a Safe Haven, a sanctuary for Assyrian Christians reeling from growing hostility and pressures.

"To lay the basis for a strong constitution that can last, it must meet the basic needs of all Iraqis, including Assyrians." says Michael Youash, Project Director of the [Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project](#). These basic needs include "giving them territorial representation by forming a state out of the Nineveh Plain area, ensuring they are represented fairly in parliament by their legitimate leadership, establishing systems of revenue sharing ensuring access to Iraqi resources equitably and without Kurdish Authority political demands, and providing for basic freedoms such as the freedom of religion, conscience, and assembly."

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